

## REFLECTING ON ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS: FIVE MUST-DO'S FOR FACULTY AND STUDENTS

By

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### ABSTRACT

*This article will review the experiences of a graduate counselor educator in teaching and evaluating her online courses. The author will summarize her most effective instructional and assessment mechanisms, based on student performance through achievement of course objectives as well as students' feedback and comments on specific online counseling courses and methods. The article will then provide five guidelines or must-do's that have demonstrated success for faculty members and students in fully online courses at the graduate education level. These five must-do's emerged from a thorough and comprehensive review of ten online graduate counseling courses taught at a metropolitan university in New York City within the past three years. The data collected is currently being analyzed and synthesized into a research report. The five recommendations proposed by the primary instructor include Presence, Interaction, Clarity, Consistency, and Availability, which create the acronym, "PICCA", to summarize a proactive and creative approach to teaching and learning in online courses (Cicco, 2013; Cicco, 2015). Underlying the faculty and student roles in a PICCA-based online course is the understanding that each individual has a responsibility to remain attentive and engaged throughout the duration of the course and should hold an authentic commitment to strive for an optimal learning experience. The article will also include suggestions on specific ways to adapt and implement PICCA in the virtual classroom.*

**Keywords:** Counselor Educator, Course Evaluation, Graduate Education, Online Classroom, Online Counseling Courses, Online Instruction, Student and Faculty Roles, Virtual Classroom.

### INTRODUCTION

Online instruction has become an important part of higher education programs over the past decades. The expansion of fully online courses among graduate counseling programs has brought several advantages, particularly for commuter students, along with some uncertainty for counselor educators charged with imparting an education based on refining and maximizing interpersonal skills development. The study of online instruction in graduate counselor education programs propelled the current article, which is based on a seasoned counselor educator's reflections on the successful aspects of ten online counseling courses. Her reflections combine observations with data collected from assessments of student performance and student responses on course evaluation forms. The result of reviewing ten online courses

were five major recommendations, or must-do's, for faculty and students in their online course experiences of teaching and learning. The must-do's, i.e. Presence, Interaction, Clarity, Consistency, and Availability, summarized in the acronym "PICCA", are explained in further detail in the sections below. They are based on the foundation that an understanding of learning style preferences impact the outcomes in online courses, including student mastery of course objectives. Furthermore, each of the must-do's is an indication of the relevance of course structure and faculty-student rapport in determining overall success and satisfaction in online courses (Cicco, 2014; LaBarbera, 2013).

### An Online Educator's Reflections

The conscientious online educator seeks not only to eliminate practices that do not enhance student learning

but to continually improve those methods that have proven to work in the classroom. This article will summarize those effective practices that have demonstrated results in terms of students' mastering course objectives in the online classroom, particularly when triangulated methods of assessment were employed to gage the levels at which course milestones were reached. It is necessary for such studies, and others that utilize mixed-methods designs, to inform the community of online instructors and students to best serve the stakeholders and particularly the recipients of online instruction. Improving methods of instruction, interaction, and assessment will be likely to improve online course outcomes. The foundation for this article lies in the importance of faculty reflection on teaching practice and on the quality of their students' learning experiences. Ten online graduate counseling courses, taught at a metropolitan university in New York City, were examined by the primary course instructor, a veteran counselor and counselor educator. She reviewed student scores on numerous formative and summative assessments, from multiple-choice exams with clear and objective scoring, to small-group presentations and essays, utilizing rubrics with some level of subjectivity based on the scorer. Then students' comments on course evaluations were studied to gain a fuller understanding of students' experiences. The quantitative and qualitative data are being analyzed and synthesized by the instructor in a full research report, not included herein. The study was a direct follow-up to prior research that examined the perceptions of educators, practitioners, and faculty towards online counseling courses (Cicco, 2013).

The present article focuses instead on the recommendations that emerged from the present collective investigation, particularly based on the instructor's informal observations and on student feedback, according to their ratings of the course and comments submitted on course evaluation forms. These evaluations are conducted at the end of each online course, and allow for students to elaborate on those instructional practices that are most impressive and effective and on those that have been less impactful on the learning process or that have actually hindered progress. Course evaluations allow students the opportunity to voice their preferences and concerns and in so doing

may help the instructor improve future courses for other students (Grady, 2013).

The idea of teaching counseling courses in a fully online modality was at some point viewed as controversial due to the gate-keeping role inherent to counselor education programs. Nevertheless, more counseling programs are incorporating online programming and fully online learning modules. The result is the need for greater reflective practice on teaching counseling courses in virtual classrooms. The counselor educator whose reflections are summarized in this article narrowed down the key factors to student success in online graduate counseling courses to two overarching themes: structure and relationships. The structure of the course responds to individuals' emotional learning-style preferences and provides a clear picture of performance expectations, timelines, and available resources. The relationships built within the course correspond to students' sociological learning-style preferences and the need to develop supervisory and peer relationships and a support system through ongoing, consistent, and reliable interactions with the faculty instructor and classmates (Cicco, 2014; LaBarbera, 2013; Yukselfurk & Yildirim, 2008). Each of these factors underlies the PICCA approach to online instruction, which will be elaborated upon in the sections below.

## Instruction and Assessment

An educator's effectiveness is often measured by student performance outcomes such as test scores, grades on major assignments or capstone projects, and final grade point averages. To capture the totality of instructional effectiveness, however, it is necessary to identify which practices, students identified as most helpful and effective in delivering information and fostering skill development while simultaneously improving overall learning experiences and satisfaction. The counselor educator depicted in this article employed learning styles instructional theory in creating diverse lesson plans and vigorous online learning modules. The modules also employed regular mapping tools to help students navigate through weekly responsibilities and tasks and stay on track throughout the semester (Cicco, 2014; Cicco, 2015). Each module included independent reading/research, support materials such as

Power Point presentations or handouts, live media such as videos or podcasts to tap into perceptual learning-style strengths, reflection exercises, discussion with course colleagues and the instructor, and a formal assessment in the form of a quiz, essay, presentation, or other assignment. The assessments were always scored utilizing a rubric and feedback was provided regularly and in a timely manner so as to be useful for subsequent assignments. The language employed and feedback provided were thoughtful and purposeful and ultimately part of the effort to establish trust and rapport while providing constructive devices for reliable evaluation and improvement (Haberstroh, 2010; Reiner & Arnold, 2010). The instructor and student evaluations of this course setup pointed to true differentiation of instruction as a necessity for meeting students' learning-style preferences while enhancing course satisfaction. Suggestions for sustaining and improving course gains included incorporating more videos to support learning, providing a quality routine while avoiding over-repetition of specific thematic units, and diversifying assessments so as to challenge and engage students while maintaining their interest over the span of 5 to 15 weeks of online instruction. Instruction and assessment are indeed partners in optimizing learning, growth, and satisfaction in any course. With these foundations at the forefront of the online educator's reflections, the PICCA approach be explained to identify the core roles that may help guide the faculty and student participants of a successful online course experience.

### The PICCA Approach for Success

Every course experience is unique and personal to the student and the instructor. A great part of the experience is independent and still much is shared as students and faculty navigate together towards the mutual goal of mastering course objectives. The PICCA approach came about as a consequence of a veteran online counselor educator routinely reflecting on the formula for success in the virtual classroom. It has been already noted that, learning style is a prime consideration in designing, implementing, and evaluating online courses for graduate students (Robb & McDaniel, 2012; Zacharis, 2011). The acronym "PICCA" is a breakdown of the standards that

must be adhered to by students and faculty to increase the chances of success while limiting unnecessary chances of failure or not meeting the full potential in online courses. This is a proactive and creative response to the widespread increase of fully online course programming in higher education with the goal of reminding students and faculty of their responsibilities to remain attentive, engaged, and committed to a positive and exceptional learning experience in the online course. The letters in "PICCA" correspond with the words presence, interaction, clarity, consistency, and availability. Each of these concepts will be explained as part of student and faculty roles, and if followed, it is hoped that a promising outcome will result for the online course participants.

#### **Presence**

Newcomers to the online course modality may be unsure of what presence in the virtual classroom actually means. At times, it is the actual presence in live meetings that are scheduled and coordinated through live media within the course management system. These meetings may include the entire class, small groups, or just the course instructor and one student at a time. Most of the time, online courses will require asynchronous presence, which can be monitored through course tools such as statistical tracking. These tools may give the instructor vital information when students have not logged into the course for an extended period of time. Students who log into the course more frequently and actually engage with the course resources are more likely to notice announcements and reminders that have been posted and they have access to course emails sent by the instructor or classmates. They also have the performance dashboard at their fingertips, to access feedback and faculty commentary on their assignments. Faculty in turn, when present regularly, will notice those students who are or who are not engaging in discussions and by all means faculty should join in on these discussions when appropriate. Faculty who are present in the virtual classroom will also be able to better identify the students who are struggling, missing assignments, or in need of more support and clarification. Providing a supportive faculty intervention early on in the semester may help students to avoid low

grades and failures. It also gives students the impression, for example by contributing to required online discussions, that they are accessible, involved, professional, and trustworthy, which will ultimately improve faculty-student rapport (Cicco, 2014; Haberstroh, 2010; Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007).

The general rule of thumb for 15-week graduate courses, is that students and faculty should be logging in at least 3 times per week. The bulk of this virtual visitation is to review the weekly readings and assignments and to post or submit required work, while the remainder should be spent on participating in discussion threads or forums and engaging with course materials through interactive exercises. It is helpful when participation in discussion boards is a weekly requirement, because this increases the likelihood of ensuring both student and faculty presence in the online course (Cicco, 2015; Yukselturk & Yildirim, 2008). Ultimately, lack of presence results in less engagement, less healthy access to other participants as support, and fewer opportunities to demonstrate learning and interest. Missing opportunities for networking and not getting important announcements may also impact on achieving professional goals and final course grades.

### *Interaction*

Interacting with others goes one major step beyond being present in the online course. Actually, interacting with classmates and with faculty helps students to build relationships and stay current on trends, such as in discussion boards, current problems or challenges students are facing in particular assignments, and being aware of changes in the curriculum or requirements. Interacting does not simply mean posting an answer to a discussion question, but instead reading others' posts and commenting on them while reading others' comments to one's own posts and replying to them as well. Interaction in this approach equates with making the most of the opportunities to reach and accommodate preferred sociological learning styles within the online course (Cicco, 2014; LaBarbera, 2013; Horton, 2013).

It is also a significant responsibility for faculty to let students know that their instructor is interested in their work, ideas, concerns, and progress. The faculty instructor who conveys

caring and concern also allows for healthy communication to take place. Without the faculty and students interacting within the virtual classroom, a void will exist that inhibits learning and satisfaction. No student or faculty member should feel alone in a vibrant online course. The course design should include activities that require collaboration and teamwork, such as discussion boards, small-group projects, interviews, or field trips to a specific course-related site, to pave the way for real interaction to take place (Cicco, 2015; Hollins-Alexander, 2013).

### *Clarity*

Clear expression aids communication in online courses. The faculty instructor must create a clear and concise syllabus that focuses on expectations for student performance in terms of professionalism, academic integrity, and ethical behavior and decision-making (Rust, Raskin, & Hill, 2013). Additionally, curricular objectives, required and suggested assignments, course materials and resources, scoring rubrics, and calendars must be made available within the course syllabus and in the online course shell even before the course begins. These issues should be addressed promptly and succinctly, to make students aware of what the standards and objectives are for the course from the onset of the semester if not sooner (Cicco, 2015; Robb & McDaniel, 2012).

Clarity of communication also involves effective use of language, with little left to mystery, misinterpretation, or confusion. This requires that the faculty instructor be highly organized and efficient in delivering information, such as instructions for a particular assignment, samples of correct responses, or directions on completing a weekly learning module. Text-laden announcements and emails may be particularly ineffective, because they may cause students to skim and miss important information in an effort to save time or avoid boredom. It may be preferable to use bullets or outlines to lay out steps for completing assignments instead of lengthy paragraphs. The instructor must achieve a balance between providing clear information without saturating documents with text that results in cognitive overload (Cicco, 2013; Cicco, 2014). Students in the online course should also strive to remain highly organized,

recognizing and delivering those points that they want to convey in order of priority. Online course writing assignments may help to practice and refine writing skills by reinforcing basic editing and proofreading to put forth clear messages in discussion board and other assignments. Students also need to be clear when asking questions or expressing concerns, particularly when they are in need of extra support. Peer-reviewed assignments also expand accountability for students to produce quality work and provide rich feedback for course colleagues (Cicco, 2014; Zacharis, 2011).

### **Consistency**

Information communicated in online courses is only clear if it is consistent. Changing the message or altering course agendas frequently may confuse students and leave room for unnecessary errors. If announcements are sent out, they should be consistent with other materials that have already been provided, such as within the syllabus or learning modules. An instructor who releases conflicting or contradictory information risks being viewed as unprofessional, untrustworthy, or altogether incompetent, which may cause students to become frustrated or to not take the course seriously (Haberstroh, 2010). Each of the other responsibilities of faculty and students in the PICCA approach is meaningless unless they are applied consistently. Instructors and students must be consistently present, interactive, clear, and available in online courses. If they perform these roles inconsistently, they will not be maximally effective and successful in the virtual classroom. Furthermore, students who aim to perform optimally and enjoy course satisfaction must behave professionally and ethically on a consistent basis, which will also improve the accuracy and usefulness of triangulated assessment measures (Cicco, 2014; Rust, Raskin, & Hill, 2013).

### **Availability**

There is perhaps nothing more frustrating for faculty and students than being unable to reach out and deliver an important and timely message. This is particularly true in an online course, when there is frequently no face-to-face interaction between course participants at all. Sending an email without receiving a response or an acknowledgement of having received the information can be particularly

bothersome and distracting. The instructor who seeks to inquire as to why a student has not submitted an assignment after the deadline has passed and the student who asks a question about completing an integral part of an assignment have concerns that merit attention and a prompt reply. Lack of availability to respond to comments, inquiries, emails, phone messages when applicable, or requests for information or help inevitably portray the online course participant as uncaring and unprofessional, which widen the communication gap and harms rapport (Cicco, 2014; Haberstroh, 2010; Trepal et al., 2007).

Faculty instructors must recognize their responsibility to be available and responsive to students' questions and concerns while students must take into account that an online course does not equate with less work or accountability. In fact, both faculty and students must possess a great deal of self-discipline and energy to make the most of the online course experience. Being available to discuss course matters, whether online, via email, on the telephone, or in person when appropriate, is a minimum standard of professional conduct and practice in the virtual classroom. It must also be noted that although the concept of availability is the last of the "PICCA" acronym, it is perhaps the most important to the development of effective communication and rapport. Turnaround timeframes for responding to email messages or calls should be established at the onset of the course, and put forth clearly as part of the virtual classroom decorum. It is also helpful to add a written contract to the course, confirming that stated classroom rules have been read and agreed upon by all course participants. A contract may alert those who are less experienced in online courses to the seriousness of this component of class participation (LaBarbera, 2013; Robb & McDaniel, 2012).

### **Implications and the Need for Future Research**

Integrating the PICCA approach into any virtual classroom requires an appreciation for creativity and the unique needs of each course participant. The PICCA approach may also be considered a series of recommendations or a model for online course instructors and students. Although it is based upon data collected over a span of three years from ten different online courses, to convert it from a series

of concepts based on reflections, observations, and analyses to a formal model will require further empirical research evidence and support from investigations that are currently underway. It is clear that there is a need for such investigations because of the increase in the number of online course offerings and fully online programs in higher education. The growth of online course offerings has outpaced the production of quality scientific research on the best and most effective practices in this instructional modality. To keep the pace in order for research to inform practice in teaching and learning in the virtual classroom, studies such as the one being conducted by the faculty member discussed in this article must be considered and expanded in the community of online instructors and researchers (Cicco, 2015; Grady, 2013; Yuksekturk & Yildirim, 2008).

## Conclusion

The PICCA approach for faculty and student success in online courses highlights simple but critically important concepts that frequently impact academic performance and overall course satisfaction. The concepts of online presence, interaction, clarity, consistency, and availability are intertwined with an understanding of learning-style preferences and they emphasize the value of empathy, professionalism, balanced communication, reciprocal trustworthiness, and academic integrity. They also remind online course participants of the work required to develop and sustain appropriate course structure while building rapport (Cicco, 2014; Haberstroh, 2010; Rust, Raskin, & Hill, 2013). The PICCA approach is proactive in that it propels students and instructors to take responsibility for the state of the virtual classroom and subsequent course outcomes. The simplicity and ease of implementation of these five must-do concepts indicate that success in online classrooms is entirely achievable, regardless of educational level or discipline.

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